

AB-2 - Paper

**Assessing the Organizational Climate in the Belgian Armed Forces**

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We believe that the behavior of a person is determined by the interaction of person characteristics and situational factors, as pithily stated by Kurt Lewin with his formula  $B = f(P, S)$ . So, work behavior is influenced by the perception the person has of several aspects of the organization he works for. Such organizational characteristics are - among others- equipment and its technological level of sophistication, but values, rules, decision making processes and coworkers behavior also are. *Organizational climate* is defined as *the synthetic, collective perception of a set of relatively stable internal aspects of the organization as experienced and described by the members of that organization*.

A diagnostic instrument, with which this climate can be assessed, is like a "thermometer", indicating if the organization is experienced as more or less "healthy" or as more or less "ill". The instrument that we will briefly describe below measures several aspects that are "symptomatic" for the climate. To be a good thermometer, it must satisfy at least three criteria: 1) theoretically well founded, 2) psychometrically sound, and, last but not least, 3) practical usable. Under these conditions, it gives the leader sufficient information for purposive interventions. For example, when the climate is assessed before and after an intervention, the leader can determine the effect of his intervention. He can also compare the perception of successive hierarchical levels, or of the different units under his responsibility. Further, one can ask the subordinates to describe the current climate and the desired climate. In other words, it is also possible to confront different perceptions about the same reality. Based on the results of such an index, the leader can assess more detailed information with respect to a particular problematic domain with the corresponding subscale by means of an inventory ad hoc; e.g. the psychological distance between superiors and their subordinates.

**Method**

Our work is inspired by the work that has been done at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium in the eighties, where several questionnaires have been developed focusing on particular types of organizations, e.g. profit organizations and hospitals. From a psychological point of view a military unit behaves according to the same basic organizational dynamics as its civilian counterparts, but there are surely shifts in importance with respect to some characteristics; consequently own norm tables are needed.

The questionnaire we developed, named Organization Climate Index for Military Units, which Dutch acronym is OKIME, is a part of a larger research project that assesses other aspects of work life quality. Two forms have been developed, a complete form with 202 items and a short form that contains a selection of 39 items (out of 202) reflecting at best the four dimensions found with the complete form. These dimensions can also be interpreted as two independent bipolar axes. I.e. 1) *orientation towards the (realization of the goals of the) organization (ORG)* versus 2) *orientation towards human development concerns (HUM)*, on the one side and 3) *orientation towards stability (STA)* versus 4) *orientation towards flexibility (FLEX)* at the other side. The latter two refer to the tendency to maintain a status quo rather than to adapt to the changes in the external situation; for example, the drastic downsizing of our Armed Services.

The combination of those four dimensions two by two, defines four basic types of organizational climate. 1) Organizations that are flexible and primarily oriented to their development are *innovative (INN)*. 2) If they are flexible and feel primarily concerned by the members, they are *supportive organizations (SUP)*. 3) The couple composed of stability and orientation toward the organization is typical for *purposive information flow (PIF)*. 4) Stability and people orientation characterizes a bureaucratic organization where "*respecting the rules*" (ROR) is important. Table 1 gives a brief description of each type.

Each item of the questionnaire is expressed as a four-point scale ranging from "always" to "never" c.q. from "everybody" to "nobody". An example of an item referring to a particular climate is given below. Subjects were asked to think of *their unit* when responding to an item, and not to the Armed Forces as a whole.

INN: Here, [...] searche(s) for new and better work methods. [everybody] [many people] [only a few] [nobody]

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*SUP: Here, people help each other [...] when in difficulties. [always] [mostly] [from time to time] [never]*

*ROR: Here, the quality of the work done is controlled [...]: [always] [mostly] [from time to time] [never]*

*PIF: Here, decisions are communicated in such a way to [...], so that they can adapt easily their task. [everybody] [many people] [only a few] [nobody]*

It should be clear that an organization reflects to some extent each of the climate types, but probably with one more prone relative to the other three. For example, the climate of a university should be characterized especially by INN.

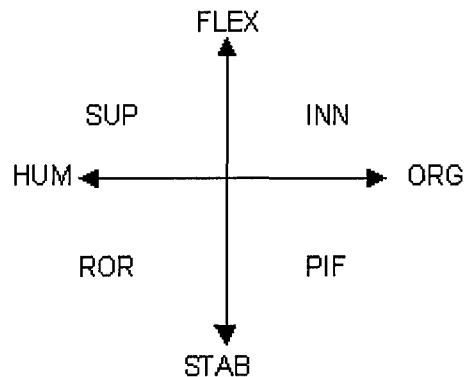
Further, an overemphasized climate type to the detriment of the other three basic types, is indicative for a danger of organizational dysfunctioning. For example, an institution that is too SUP, resembles probably more a "country club" and a research center that is too INN will be rather chaotic. Too much ROR turns into rigidity and estrangement while too much PIF leads too "green thinking" (lack of criticism).

**Table 1.** Brief description of the types of organizational climate

Type of Climate	Characteristics	Attention oriented toward	Dysfunctional type
<b>Supportive</b>	People are central Values are important	Collaboration, Tolerance Social support Human concerns	Country Club
<b>Innovative</b>	Change Adaptation Individual initiative Diversity Competition	Growth Risk Stimulation of initiative Individual responsibility Optimal use of human resources Use of scientific research findings	Chaos
<b>Respecting Rules</b>	Safety Continuity Uniformity Conformism	Structure Formalization Centralization Standardization	Rigidity Estrangement
<b>Purposive information flow</b>	Planning Management Efficacy	Productivity Efficiency Workload Purposive instructions Organization	Green thinking

The results about the climate of a unit can be graphically represented in a metric space using these basic dimensions as axes and the typology in the different quadrants (Figure 1). The scales of each climate are based on a normal distribution with a mean of ten and a standard deviation of three  $[N(10,3)]$ . A result has thus to be interpreted as a deviation from the "overall average perception" (reflected in the mean), with the standard deviation as the "unit" of measurement, and not in an absolute sense. In our case, the results obtained for the whole of the Armed Forces constitute the references for the comparison of Services, personnel categories, and so on.

**Figure 1.** Graphical representation of the organizational climate.



Two consecutive drafts of the questionnaire have been evaluated in two samples of about 600 members belonging to different Services, with different ranks and pertaining to different types of units. Given the limited space here, the socio-demographic and the occupational statistics of the samples will not be discussed.

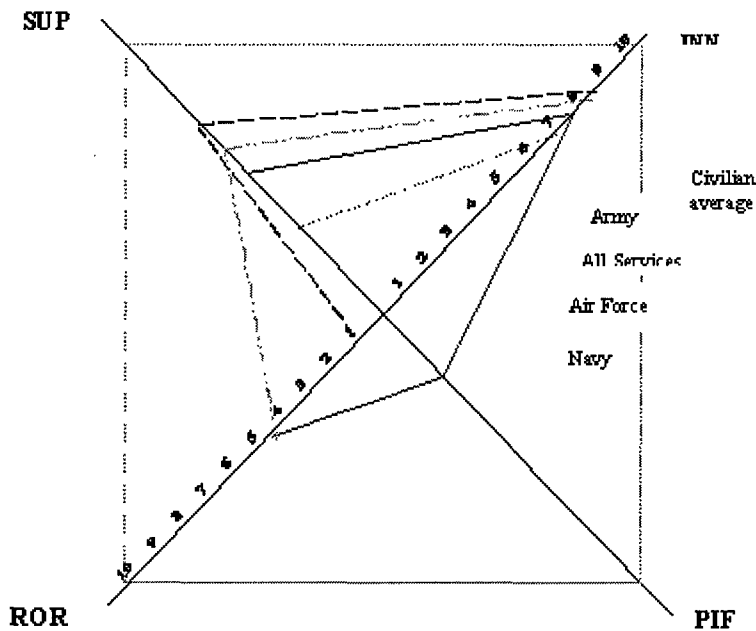
## Results and discussion

In the following results for the Belgian Armed Forces will be presented and commented. It must be noticed that these results are preliminary findings and serve here more illustrative purpose of the use of the OKIME than a precise description of the current situation in the Belgian Armed Forces.

First, we computed results according to the rules for civilian organizations. This allows for a comparison between several "subgroups" of the military organization with the "average profit organization" as a standard. The position of the Armed Services as a whole, Army, Air Force, and Navy are shown in Figure 2. It can easily be derived from Figure 2 that the Armed Forces score quite below the average profit organization (score = 10) on all types of climate. This comparison is not totally honest, because it might be that soldiers give another interpretation as the civilians to the same question. Further, the Belgian Armed Forces are still in a phase of fundamental reorganization, which is also still subject of a political debate. Our future is thus far from clear. When we compare the different Services to each other we see that Air Force and Navy score relatively better on SUP than the Army does. This may be due to the fact that the former have a Total Quality Management Program with a clear Human Resources Plan; this is yet not the case for the Army where the idiom "first the horse, than the horseman" is applied in a rather strict way. A similar pattern holds for INN, although less pronounced. This reflects the stereotype that the Army is (much) more conservative than the other Forces. The score on ROR is much lower for the Navy than for both other Services. This order is understandable when one thinks in terms of formal versus informal discipline. Finally, the Navy scores higher on PIF than the Air Force, which is even higher than the Army's score. In other words, the information concerning the mission of a given Service and concerning the daily routine tasks is clearest in the Navy, somewhat less clear in the Air Force and rather unclear in the Army. These results have also to be compared with the ones obtained using the norms elaborated for the Armed Forces, in which the deviation from the mean becomes less clear cut. (See next paragraph).

**Figure 2.** The graphical and metric representation of the organizational climate – The Armed Services

(Note: norms for profit organizations)



The results for several subgroups, according to the norms established for the Belgian Armed Forces are summarized in Table 2; i.e. Service, type of contract, personnel category, and gender. Within each Service we assessed the climate for the major groups characterizing that Service. For the Army, we took battalion types pertaining to a Brigade structure. In the Air Force, we distinguished between the aircraft crewmembers on the one side, and the non-flying personnel on the other side. Similarly at the Navy, there are people who go to sea and the people who stay on shore. As already said, the norm becomes the results of the whole sample, standardized to  $N(10; 3)$ ; this is reflected in the square with vertices at 10.

At the level of the different Services we find the same pattern as described above, but the differences are now much smaller. To a certain extent all soldiers experience the same climate pattern that is very close to the overall average. The lack of net differences may be due to the "distance" between the level of the respondent and the level of the unit to judge: the bigger the distance the more the pattern regresses to the mean. The nuances between Forces can be explained by their "volume": the smaller the unit assessed, the more the scores are clear cut.

The perception of the subgroups based on the types of contract, fall apart in two groups: on the side the soldiers with a contract for a fixed (short) period (the "temporary" personnel), and the soldiers with a lifelong contract at the other side (the "complementary" and the "career" personnel). The fact that the complementary personnel has a rank limited career does not influence their perception of the climate. There is a difference of one standard deviation between the two groups on SUP. This seems to indicate that these people are not well integrated in their unit; they feel not enough involved and experience a lack of consideration. Further, the lower score on PIF indicates that they believe that they do not receive enough information for an efficient completion of their function or job. The lower score on INN may refer to the fact that they do not receive enough responsibility, nor are they stimulated to take initiatives (if they are not refrained from) and feel thus underemployed. Even ROR is below average. Temporary people experience some uncertainty – e.g. about what to do after their contract expired. There also exists a lack of continuity in the fulfillment of their job: sometimes they are assimilated with the career personnel, but sometimes the fact that they are not career people is emphasized.

In contrast with our expectations, we did not find any difference among the personnel categories. This is also in contrast with the general rule, that the higher the rank, the more prone the scores are. Thus the profile of the officers should encompass the profile of the NCO's, which in turn should encompass the profile of the privates. It is possible that the difference between officers and the two others have been cancelled out by the big difference in the number of respondents in the groups, the ratio being about 1:5. Therefore a comparison with weighted scores, corresponding to the stratification in the Armed Forces has to be done.

We did find neither a difference between male and female soldiers in the perception of the climate. This can signify that there is no difference because they are (mostly) treated in the same way (equal rights, equal duties), or, again, the fact that the women are by and large outnumbered by the men (ratio 1:18 in the sample) may influence the (lack of) discrimination.

The comparison between some Arms of the Army shows the following. Except for three scores – Armored SUP, (8.5), Infantry PIF (8.1), and Artillery ROR (11.2) -all other scores are situated in the vicinity of the mean. The only type of unit that scores systematically above the mean, is Artillery. People belonging to Armored Units, experience the climate as not enough SUP. This is not a good sign for combat troops, where good interpersonal relationships are of central interest. The order of the scores on INN is a little bit surprising in the same sense. Risk taking, initiative and responsibility are values that are preached in the Armored troops but the observed score is "only" average. On the contrary, Artillery, where the technical aspects are prevalent, scores slightly above average. Infantry men seem to experience the climate to "reactive" as shown by the low score on PIF. There is somewhat a lack of planning, and work cannot sufficiently efficiently be organized due to problems with the goal oriented information flow (PIF). Further, Artillery is characterized by a higher respect for rules (ROR) than the other Arms, in which the rules for the daily routine seem not always applied as it should be in combat Arms. It may be the case that people miss somewhat structure in the implementation of the different missions of the unit; this can be due to a shortage in manpower, so that people shift unfortunately from one job to another, depending on the priorities of the moment.

The differences found between the flying and the not flying personnel of the Air Force are also a little bit contra-intuitive. We expected that crewmen would score clearly higher than average on SUP. This is clearly not the case. Given the ratio flying/not flying of 1:20 in the sample do not reflect the real stratification, and, on the other hand, those seven pilots are perhaps – for unknown reasons - not representative for the population of pilots. A larger sample has to be questioned. The same holds for INN. (Calculated) risk, initiative, sense of responsibility, and integration of scientific findings are believed to be core values of an Airbase, but in practice things seem to be a little bit different. PIF is only slightly above average while ROR is just below average in both subgroups.

In the Navy, we found no distinction between the subgroups for SUP, nor for ROR. There is a small difference on INN and a more prone discrimination on PIF where the scores for personnel at sea are the higher ones. This is in line with the expectations, but given that the Belgian Navy is a very small Service and has a well implemented TQM program, we expected the differences to be higher than average. There may be an effect of the ratio at sea/on shore of 10:1, which hides the impact of the people on shore; meanwhile a new group "on shore" has been questioned but results are yet not available.

Finally, a totally fully different population that participated in the development of the questionnaire is our own students. We asked them to think of the Royal Military Academy RMA) as being their "unit". The Dutch speaking students have a somewhat more positive image of the climate than their French speaking colleagues. More important is the overall pattern. As expected, is INN the most pregnant aspect in the total perception, relative to the other three aspects. This is not surprising, given that the RMA is a (military) university. The RMA seems to be strong in respect for rules ROR). This is not surprising for a school, where structure, standardization and central management are typical instances of the ROR-aspect. Our students seem to experience a clear lack of (social) support as expressed in the low score (7 on average) for SUP. Here, we observe a contrast between what the academy tries to realize with its students and the way it is perceived by the students themselves. We try to promote, among others, collaboration, tolerance, concern for people through several initiatives (e.g. councils in which the students are represented, delegation of some responsibilities) but simultaneously there is a marked lack of PIF as shown by the very low score on PIF. For some part, this can be explained by the particular organization of the school in three Directions (civilians would call it "business units"). The first Direction is responsible for the academic education, the second one for military instruction and sports and the third for logistics. All three Directions communicate directly with the commander of the student groups, often without coordination. It is then easy to understand that such a way of doing leads from time to time to contradictions, if not to conflicts. Notwithstanding a careful elaborated plan for a whole academic year, there are too much changes, which are often not announced or too late to allow for an adequate reaction. In summary, this is, at least in our opinion, a "beautiful" instance of the thermometer function of the OKIME.

## Conclusions

The organizational climate is an important concept in managing and leading a unit. Therefore, it is important that a commander has an instrument to assess this climate.

This instrument has to satisfy three requirements: theoretically based, psychometric sound and easy to use.

Especially the latter is important for the leader of a unit if we want him to exploit the full potential of the instrument; i.e. to use it for the different purposes it is conceived for.

The results shown here are only preliminary results. Further analysis of the available data is needed and computation of weighted scores corresponding to the real stratification in the Belgian Armed Forces, have to be carried out in order to find a measure that discriminates well between the subgroups considered. Units of a type not questioned yet have to be incorporated.

**Table 2.** Coordinates for the different subgroups (military norms – unweighted scores\*)

Target groups (n)		SUPPORTIVE	INNOVATIVE	PURPOSIVE	RULES
Services	Army (237)	9.2	9.5	9.2	10.2
	Air Force (158)	10.5	10.2	10.1	9.8
	Navy (154)	10.6	10.4	10.8	7.9
Contract	Temporary (10)	6.7	8.5	7.7	9.0
	Complementary (52)	10.3	9.7	9.9	9.9
	Career (483)	10.0	10.1	10.1	10.0
Category	Officers (47)	9.4	9.3	9.5	9.4
	NCO (259)	10.2	10.1	10.2	9.8
	Private (233)	9.9	10.0	9.9	10.2
Gender	Male (529)	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Female (28)	9.8	8.9	9.7	9.5
Army	Infantry (105)	9.6	9.1	8.1	9.8
	Armored Troops (125)	8.5	9.9	9.2	9.4
	Artillery (124)	10.6	10.3	10.8	11.2
	Logistics (112)	10.1	9.6	9.1	10.1
Air Force	Flying Personnel (7)	8.7	9.0	10.4	9.9
	Other (137)	10.3	10.3	10.3	9.6
Navy	Aboard (145)	10.2	10.4	10.8	10.0
	On shore (13)	10.3	9.5	9.5	9.9
RMA**	Dutch (33)	8.2	12.0	4.1	9.0
	French (21)	7.0	9.0	3.0	6.0

\* The mean scores have been computed on the basis of the total target group. Results may be biased for

(very) small groups. In the case of weighted scores the mean of the target group is computed on the basis of the means for the subgroups; by doing so all subgroups are considered equally important.

**\*\*Results based only on the third year All Arms Division (3TAW).**

## INTERNET DOCUMENT INFORMATION FORM

**A . Report Title:** Assessing the Organizational Climate in the Belgian Armed Forces

**B. DATE Report Downloaded From the Internet** 4/21/99

**C. Report's Point of Contact: (Name, Organization, Address, Office Symbol, & Ph #):** Navy Advancement Center  
Attn: Dr. Grover Diel (850) 452-1815  
Pensacola, FL

**D. Currently Applicable Classification Level:** Unclassified

**E. Distribution Statement A:** Approved for Public Release

**F. The foregoing information was compiled and provided by:**  
**DTIC-OCA, Initials:** VM\_ **Preparation Date:** 4/21/99\_\_

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